

***Fichte, Schleiermacher and W. von Humboldt***  
***On the Creation of the University of Berlin***

By Claude Piché, Université de Montréal  
Translated from the French by Caroline Miller

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[This is a preprint. A shortened version of the paper has been published in : *Fichte, German Idealism and Early Romanticism*, D. Breazeale and T. Rockmore (eds), *Fichte-Studien-Supplementa*, Vol. 24, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2010, p. 371-386. ]

A SPANISH translation of this paper is to be found here in *Papyrus*.

La version originale en FRANÇAIS de ce texte a été déposée dans *Papyrus*.

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**ABSTRACT** : On the eve of the foundation of the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt was in charge of choosing between the various proposals submitted for the organization of the future institution. Since he had to choose for instance between the Fichte's and Schleiermacher's proposals, he retained the project of the latter, feeling closer to Schleiermacher's liberal approach than with Fichte's more 'authoritarian' views. In fact, the profound difference between Humboldt and Fichte is to be found in their respective conception of the 'vocation of man'. For Humboldt the human being has to develop his/her own unique personality through the process of "Bildung", whereas for Fichte the ultimate aim of human beings is to reach a point of perfection in which all individuals would be identical. This fundamental divergence has consequences on all aspects of the project: curriculum, student life and pedagogy.

**KEYWORDS** : Fichte, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Schleiermacher, University of Berlin, organization

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It is in the fall of 1810 that the first classes were given in the brand new University of Berlin. In itself, the occurrence is historically important because this institution was to be called upon to become the "prototype of modern university."<sup>1</sup> But the historical event of the foundation of the University of Berlin also presents a philosophical interest, insofar as, when the time came to outline the structures of this establishment of higher education, it is philosophers who were invited to submit their projects, in accordance with their idea of the status and role of knowledge. The drafts of

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<sup>1</sup> See Louis Dumont, *L'idéologie allemande* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

these projects are for that matter available in an anthology devoted to the idea of the German university.<sup>2</sup> We find therein, besides the texts of Fichte and Schleiermacher, the one from Wilhelm von Humboldt whom, by virtue of his administrative responsibilities, had to make a choice between the proposals of the first two. We know that he will adopt Schleiermacher's project, and not Fichte's. The latter actually defends an "authoritarian" approach to teaching which is diametrically opposed to Schleiermacher's own, described as "liberal".

I borrow the contrast 'authoritarian/liberal' from the "Présentation" of the French translation of the anthology referred to, which thereby sets the limits of the debate between Fichte and Schleiermacher.<sup>3</sup> It is understood, of course, that we will have to go back on the validity of this characterization. For the moment, we must admit that this dichotomy is very useful at first sight. In fact, if we set out to interpret those qualifying terms literally, we must expect to see Schleiermacher attach the greatest importance to individual freedom within the confines of university life, while Fichte in all probability will tend to favor authority, even to abuse it. This reading follows the first semantic content of these terms. Now, it is advisable to note that this contrast is expressed in a vocabulary that belongs to the sphere of politics. Yet the underlying significance of what is really at stake here is to be found somewhere else.

As I have said, it is philosophers who were summoned to contribute to the elaboration of the project of a new university in Berlin, and the contrast 'authoritarian/liberal' stays on the surface of something which, in the final analysis, refers to different views on human beings, to differing ideas on the development of humanity. To state it briefly, Humboldt finds in Schleiermacher's project his own concept of *Bildung*, a word that means formation, education. But we will see that this term must be translated more specifically by 'self-education', in the sense that *Bildung* is essentially left to the individual's initiative, whom through it develops according to his own original, inalienable character. Fichte tackles, for his part, the question of education from the point of view of his philosophical system, the science of knowledge. Consequently, the idea of university education based on this philosophy entails that the individual, as he makes

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<sup>2</sup> E. Anrich (ed.), *Die Idee der Deutschen Universität* (Darmstadt: Hermann Gentner Verlag, 1956).

<sup>3</sup> L. Ferry, J.-P. Person and A. Renaut (eds), *Philosophies de l'Université. L'idéalisme allemand et la question de l'Université*, (Paris : Payot, 1979), p. 17.

progress in science (and wisdom), comes to transcend himself as an individual, to go beyond his empirical uniqueness. That is what characterizes the two conflicting positions that confront themselves in the debate.

To set out this confrontation of the thought of Fichte with Humboldt and Schleiermacher's own ideas at the occasion of the foundation of the University of Berlin, we may proceed in three steps. In the first place, it is proper to provide some details on the historical circumstances and the intellectual climate in which this confrontation takes place. Afterwards, we will be able to enter the heart of the matter by comparing the ultimate idea of the finality of the human being on both sides. The vocation of man in society in Fichte and its equivalent in Humboldt will be contrasted here. Finally, the third step will allow us to observe in a precise manner – with the help of concrete examples – the consequences which at the pedagogical level follow from these differing ideas of the vocation of man.

### I – Historical and intellectual context of the foundation of the University of Berlin.

The event of the the foundation in 1810 of the first university establishment in Berlin can in itself seem astonishing: at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the city of Berlin no doubt hosts specialized institutes and a few academies, among which we have to include first and foremost the famous Academy of science, but it does not have an actual university.<sup>4</sup> The main university of Prussia is in fact to be found in Halle, in the dukedom of Magdeburg. But, with the loss of this duchy following the Napoleonic invasions, the question of the creation of a university establishment in the capital of Prussia, even of a “transfer” of the University of Halle to Berlin, comes up acutely. So, in September 1807, while the city is still occupied by the French troops –they will leave the following year --, the minister Beyme is entrusted with the task of seeing to the setting up of the University of Berlin.<sup>5</sup> But, as on the occasion of this transfer they intend to reorganize the structure of the institution from top to bottom, Beyme asks the philosopher Fichte to submit a plan to that end before him. A few weeks later, the latter will present to

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<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see *Die Universität Humboldt. Gestern-Heute-Morgen*, ed. Gerhard Krüger *et al.* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1960), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> See “Présentation”, *Philosophies de l'Université*, p. 10.

the ministry of education his *Deduced Scheme for an Academy to Be Established in Berlin*. Having been informed of the content of this plan, Schleiermacher submits in turn a project, under the title of *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*, text written and published in 1808. Here, we must not be surprised by the allusion to the “German” character of the future institution. Schleiermacher writes “occasional thoughts” and, in this case, the circumstances that surround the writing of his text are those of a defeated Germany. For Schleiermacher, as for the Fichte of the *Addresses to the German Nation*, the establishment of a “national education” and the setting up of institutions of higher learning actually have something of a reflex of defence faced with the invader.<sup>6</sup> In other words, both philosophers call for a spiritual mobilization of the German people to counter the humiliation of the defeat.

It will be up to Wilhelm von Humboldt, as a deputy minister commissioned by Beyme, to make a choice between the project of Fichte and Schleiermacher. We know that he will opt for the model of the latter, which corresponds well to his liberal allegiances. However, it is advisable here to be more precise as far as the grounds of his decision are concerned. It is no doubt as a political man, responsible for “cult and education,”<sup>7</sup> that Humboldt makes his choice. But his political liberalism is not just a veneer and it is not a case of thoughtless or unconsidered support. It possesses, on the contrary, a deep-rooted foundation, characteristic of Humboldt, the thinker. The validity of his bias towards Schleiermacher’s project does not for that matter stand out with all the desirable clarity from the text he produces between 1809 and 1810 on higher education and research, which will remain unfinished: *On the Inner and Outer Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*. This is why I will take the liberty to consult other texts from this author, as I will do for Schleiermacher and Fichte. Be that as it may regarding the theoretical arguments that motivated Humboldt’s choice, we are forced to conclude that on the level of its tangible results, the adoption of the academic regulations proposed by Schleiermacher proved to be sensible. We only need to remember that to this day the University of Berlin was able to include within its professorial corpus close to thirty Nobel Prize recipients!

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<sup>6</sup> See Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1910), p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> See *Die Universität Humboldt, Gestern-Heute-Morgen*, p. 19.

The intellectual climate in which the project of the University of Berlin originated is characterized by an exceptional effervescence. The matter at hand is of course German idealism, a philosophical movement standing at the confluence of multiple tendencies and influences, among which we have to mention the critical reception of Kant's work and an historical event of far-reaching consequences: the French Revolution. In both cases, for that matter, the central problem turns out to be freedom; that is to say, on the one hand, freedom as a metaphysical and moral problem, on the other hand, political freedom seen from the angle of the concrete conditions for its realization.

For the protagonists of the debate here under consideration, these two orders of preoccupation are never absent. They are even linked in a certain manner. For instance Fichte notes the historical importance of the French Revolution, which he greets with enthusiasm, yet he feels at the same time the necessity to set in motion a philosophical revolution that not only is in a position to provide a transcendental justification of freedom, but also places this freedom at the center of the philosophical system.<sup>8</sup> We know, for example, that Fichte will describe his science of knowledge as the "first system of freedom". As for Schleiermacher and Humboldt's attitudes when faced with the French Revolution, we must acknowledge that they welcome it in a more mitigated fashion. But as Fichte, they feel the need to counterbalance this political event with a spiritual mobilization. For instance, we must remember that Humboldt stayed in Paris in the summer of 1789. He is therefore an eyewitness to the events of this epoch. Obviously, Humboldt is mostly known to posterity as an eminent linguist, notably as the author of *On language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of Human Species*, the general viewpoint of this thought being comparative anthropology. However, what we may be less acquainted with from Wilhelm von Humboldt is his posthumous work on the "limits of the State", which we will look into in the next section and which will be of interest for the idea of *Bildung* that is developed therein. For the time being, it should be sufficient to say that Humboldt

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<sup>8</sup> On the close connection that exists in Fichte's mind between political freedom and the science of knowledge, we can refer to Alexis Philonenko, *Théorie et Praxis dans la pensée morale et politique de Kant et de Fichte en 1793* (Paris: Vrin, 1968), p. 78 sq. Also see Ives Radrizzani, "Préface" to J. G. Fichte, *Lettres et témoignages sur la Révolution française* (Paris, Vrin, 2002), p 10, 15.

adopts a liberal position, halfway between the “egalitarian pathos”<sup>9</sup> urged by the Revolution and the despotism that all too often was the hallmark of the Prussian State. As for Friedrich Schleiermacher, he is mostly known nowadays to have grasped the universal character of hermeneutics or else as the author of *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*. Nevertheless, it must not make us forget the altogether central place of ethics in his thought.<sup>10</sup> In connection with that, I will stress only one point: we find in Schleiermacher a criticism of the “legal”<sup>11</sup> point of view of Kantian morality. Actually, this point takes on a particular importance for our subsequent developments. If freedom in Kant’s writings is defined as autonomy, is it necessary, asks Schleiermacher, that the moral law in question be the same for all? From a legal point of view, no doubt that it is only normal that it be so. However, from a moral point of view, can we also say that individuals, being equal in the eyes of the law of practical reason, are so to speak, replaceable? We discover here a marked insistence on the uniqueness of the moral subject and of his mission on earth, which is not unfamiliar to, as we will see, the idea of individual *Bildung* proposed by Humboldt.

In order to better grasp the topic of our discussion, we can compare the three authors from the point of view of their concept of freedom, but this time, within the limits of the higher education institution. In other words, a first clarification as far as the attitude of each of these thinkers regarding “academic freedom” is concerned can here turn out to be useful. This is obviously a well-known theme at the time, and it does not stem as such from the discussion that surrounded the foundation of the University of Berlin. But if we pursue in greater detail the different angles of this academic freedom, as we find them listed, for example, in the inaugural address delivered by Fichte at the

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert Haerdter, his postscript to Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1967), p. 218 (cited below *Versuch*); trans. J. W. Burrow, *The Limits of State Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1969.

<sup>10</sup> On the articulation of hermeneutics, dialectics and ethics, see Christian Berner, *La philosophie de Schleiermacher* (Paris: Cerf, 1995), p. 39-41. Robert B. Loudon, “Introduction” to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. VII.

<sup>11</sup> Schleiermacher, *Monologen* (1800) (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1978), p. 27, see also p. XVIII; from the same author *Brouillon zur Ethik* (1805/06) (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1981), p. 4, 47.

University of Berlin in 1811, we will be better able to identify the different points of view that are accepted unanimously and those that are at the origin of the dispute.<sup>12</sup>

Fichte tackles the question of academic freedom under two main angles: 1- the independence of the institution from the outside world; 2 - the freedom that must prevail within the institution. The first aspect of this academic freedom receives the assent of all three protagonists: the university must enjoy a complete independence and a perfect autonomy from the state and from civil society. Consequently, even if the financing of higher learning institutions comes from the government, the latter must not hold the right to approve the activities that take place there, at least in principle. We know that in actual fact, Humboldt will be forced by circumstances to adopt a position of compromise regarding the hiring of professors.<sup>13</sup> The second aspect is itself subdivided into two elements: a) the freedom to determine the content of his teaching which must be enjoyed by each professor and b) the academic freedom which the students benefit from as members of the institution. Here again, the first of these two elements do not pose a problem. All three acknowledge that in addition to the freedom to think and to write, the university teacher must have the opportunity to determine the content of his classes, in accordance with his research interests. However, the disagreement is tangible when it comes to the question of the student's way of life within the institution. As we will have the opportunity to observe, Fichte has a concept of the freedom of the student that differs from those of Schleiermacher and Humboldt. The disagreement, which we will expound the diverse facets of in the third part of this presentation, concerns the student's concrete manners as much as the questions relating to the regulations of studies and to the modalities of learning. In the last case, we will see major differences arise with regard to

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<sup>12</sup> In 1811, Fichte actually becomes the first rector elected by the senate. The title of his speech is the following: "Über die einzig mögliche Störung der akademischen Freiheit" ("Concerning the Only Possible Disturbance of Academic Freedom"), in J. G. Fichte, *Sämmtliche Werke*, book VI (Berlin: Veit & Comp., 1845/46), p. 451-476 (the complete works of Fichte are cited below *Werke*, followed by the volume and the pagination).

<sup>13</sup> On the part played by the state in the process of hiring teachers, see Wilhelm von Humboldt, „Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin“ (1809 or 1810), in *Die Idee der deutschen Universität*, p. 380, 385 (cited below *Organisation*) ; also see Eduard Spranger's introduction to the anthology *Über das Wesen der Universität* (Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1919), p. XXII. On Schleiermacher's position, see *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn* (1808), in the same, *Texte zur Pädagogik*, book 1, ed. M. Winkler and J. Brachmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), p. 122 (cited below *Gelegentliche Gedanken*). I will occasionally allow myself to modify the translations used.

the student-teacher relationship. But for the moment, it is proper to draw our attention to the theoretical presuppositions that motivate in an underground manner the respective positions.

## II- The vocation of man according to Fichte and Humboldt.

As astonishing as it may seem, the outcome of the conflict between the “authoritarian” and the “liberal” approach of the University of Berlin was sealed even before Fichte and Humboldt entrusted their plan to the ministry. Already, at the beginning of the 1790’s, Humboldt had produced a manifesto in praise of liberalism, the title of which is in itself very evocative: *The Limits of State Action*. At the time, the work was not published in its entirety, but only a few sections, notably Chapter VI on state and education, which appeared in the December 1792 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. Of course, this is a political treatise, but we discover in it the workings, in a way that is not irrelevant, of the concept of *Bildung*. For it essentially corresponds to the idea that Humboldt has of man, as an individual in relation to society. This text, published in its entirety posthumously, can therefore serve as a basis for the comparison of this concept of man with that of the vocation of man in Fichte. To set the stage for the comparison, it is not necessary to refer to Fichte’s 1800 work entitled precisely *The Vocation of Man*. This theme is actually tackled by Fichte in *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation* that he gave the moment he arrived at the University of Jena in 1794. Only two years separate the writing of Humboldt’s text from Fichte’s lectures. But the difference between their respective positions is no less important and will come up again at the time of the evaluation of the projects for the new university.

In order to get the measure of the theoretical, even philosophical, gap that widens between the concepts of the individual on both sides, it might be helpful to juxtapose two passages drawn from each of the texts considered here. In both cases, what is called into question is the concept of man in relation to society. Let us begin with this passage from Humboldt:



The highest ideal... of the co-existence of human beings, seems to me to consist in a union in which each strives to develop himself from his own inmost nature, and for his own sake.<sup>14</sup>

Let us now read this passage from Fichte's lectures:

All of the individuals who belong to the human race differ among themselves. There is only one thing in which they are in complete agreement: their ultimate goal – perfection... the ultimate and highest goal of society is the complete unity and unanimity of all of its members.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, the theme is the same in both cases, but the direction adopted by each of the authors is radically opposed. For Humboldt, the finality of communal life is entirely centered on the individual, it is directed to his sole benefit. He is called on to pursue his development, to see to his own education (*Bildung*) as an individual, the latter appearing to be the ideal of “communal existence”. On the other hand, the Fichtean individual, at least conceived according to the ideal of humanity presented here, is invited to develop himself and in this way to make himself similar to all other human beings. Thus, on the one hand, we have a very clear affirmation of the individual, conceived as irreducible, on the other hand, the individual seems called on to abandon his originality, to make himself identical, at least in an asymptotic way, to all other men. It is therefore important to examine more closely these two approaches with a view to anticipate the consequences they entail as far as university life is concerned. Let us begin by Fichte's thesis as expounded in *On the Scholar's Vocation*.

To define the place of man in society, Fichte proceeds in two steps. First he establishes an ideal of perfection unattainable in itself, after which he introduces the task of an infinite perfecting, the latter being likely to summon up here and now the efforts of the individual, even if, in the end, it is always the pure and intangible ideal of perfection that must be aimed at. However, this ideal of perfection, although it refers to an absolute out of reach in concrete terms, nonetheless takes on for Fichte a deciding status, for it commands the gradual perfecting to which the individual must oblige, given the limits imposed by his finiteness. The idea of perfection for man is stated as follows: “Perfection

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<sup>14</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 25-26; trans. p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, *Werke* I, p. 310 (quoted hereafter as *Einige Vorlesungen*); trans. D. Breazeale, *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation*, in J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 159.

is determined in only one respect: it is totally self-identical. If all men could be perfect, if they could all achieve their highest and final goal, then they would be totally equal [*gleich*] to each other. They would constitute but one single subject.”<sup>16</sup> The individual does not have according to this text an intrinsic value, since he expresses a particularity that must be surmounted. In point of fact, all individuals, as rational beings, are endowed with a common nature.<sup>17</sup> To use the terminology of the *System of Ethics* (1798), all have in themselves a pure I, which every individual must seek to bring his empirical and singular I in accordance to, with the help of a long and patient quest for adequation with the latter<sup>18</sup>. If all human beings were able to succeed in absorbing their empirical I into their pure I, all would be identical and would merge into a one and only subject. This thesis will remain decisive for the Fichte of the Berlin period.

If we now move on from the level of pure perfection to that of gradual perfection, we see the place and role of the individual in the development of human society take shape. Going back to a theme cherished by Kant in his “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784), Fichte maintains that the goal of the human species in history lies in the development of all of man’s abilities. Now the presence of these abilities in the individual represents a factor of homogenization, at least when these abilities are considered from the point of view of pure reason. “Since all talents have their foundation entirely within pure reason, they are all equal in themselves; therefore, they all ought to be cultivated in the same way – which is what is required by this demand. Equal results must always follow from the equal cultivation of equal talents. And thus we arrive by another route at the conclusion established in our last lecture: the final aim of all society is *the complete equality* [*Gleichheit*] *of all of its members*.”<sup>19</sup> But Fichte goes on to say that man is not only a rational being, he is also a sensuous being, a finite being on

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<sup>16</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 310; trans., p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Obviously, the issue here is only the question of man is society. Yet *Some Lectures on the Scholar’s Vocation* does not contain Fichte’s last word on the status of individuality. In actual fact, if man must rise above the egoistic tendency characteristic of the empirical I, an individuality of a superior kind is still possible. See *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben (The Way towards the Blessed Life)*, *Werke* V, p. 534-536.

<sup>18</sup> Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre*, *Werke* IV, p. 169. On this topic see Edith Düsing, „Das Problem der Individualität in Fichtes früher Ethik und Rechtslehre“, *Fichte-Studien* 3 (1991), p. 29-50; Günter Zöllner, „The Inindividuality of the I in Fichte’s Second Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, 1796-1799“, in D. Breazeale and T. Rockmore (eds), *New Essays in Fichte’s Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 120-139.

<sup>19</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 314-315; trans., p. 163.

which the non-I, that is to say nature, exerts a determining influence. In truth, nature stands in the way of pure reason since it represents a factor of “diversity”. If there are unique individuals in the world, it is essentially because nature introduces this factor of differentiation that causes the appearance of the empirical I. In this way nature sees to it that this I does not develop equally its abilities, but only a few, according to the environment in which nature situated the individual. However, Fichte cannot dispose of this factor of diversity that easily. In the perspective of a perfecting of individuals, and through it, of the species, he is forced to take it in consideration, and so the concrete individual is invited to see to the development precisely of the abilities that nature caused the awakening in him: “...nature affects the human mind in a variety of different ways... and... never develops the mind’s capacities and aptitudes in the same way twice.”<sup>20</sup> Nature is therefore at the origin of individual particularities and the choice of abilities that an individual is likely to want to perfect turns out to be limited, predetermined as it were, and so as an individual, he will never be able to aspire to be in himself the worthy representative of the entire species.

Consequently, the strategy adopted by Fichte to achieve the perfecting of the human species will consist in using the particularities imposed on the individual by nature, to exhort the latter to develop his natural talent in a unilateral manner: “nature develops everyone one-sidedly [*einseitig*]...”<sup>21</sup> Fichte guides the education of each according to the talents and abilities that nature gave rise to in the individual. However, there is a price to be paid for this targeted development of the individual: he has to sacrifice for himself the full blossoming of all of his abilities to concentrate on a few to which he devotes himself “exclusively.”<sup>22</sup> Within society, there will therefore be a distribution of tasks, a division of labor, so that for the greater benefit of the whole, the individual keeps certain features of his personality in the dark. Only the species, as Kant was already maintaining, can aspire to the full blossoming of the dispositions of humanity, whereas the individual can only make up for his own shortcomings by receiving from the other individuals the results of the exercise of their particular talents, the fruits of their own efforts. With this concession made to the unilateralism of the

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<sup>20</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 313, 314; trans., p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 315; trans., p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 320.

development of the individual talents, Fichte sets himself against Humboldt, whose deep-down intention, with the concept of *Bildung*, consists precisely in averting the danger of specialization. In the eyes of the latter, it is entirely possible to conceive the development of the individual without requiring from him that he shelves complete aspects of his personality.

The word *Bildung* has a very broad meaning, as already mentioned, and even in Humboldt it is not always used in its specific sense. The term in general means formation, education, but it must be understood here as self-education. The word is sometimes translated by “culture”, but in the present case it is important to set it aside since Fichte borrows from Kant the concept of *Kultur* to designate, as we have just seen, the development of certain privileged abilities in the individual. Now, the term *Bildung* as used by Humboldt is miles away from the Fichtean idea of culture. In Humboldt’s excerpt cited above, the whole society was considered according to, even for the benefit of the complete development of the individual. The excerpt that follows can help us define more closely the constellation in which *Bildung* displays itself. “The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development [*Bildung*] of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development [*Bildung*] presupposes; but there is besides another essential – intimately connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations.”<sup>23</sup> This text, rich in teachings, shows the main difference with the Fichtean idea of culture at the level of the individual. Thus *Bildung* is characterized by a harmonious and proportionate development of the faculties and aptitudes, rather than by a selective development of certain talents. For Humboldt, *Bildung* must be both proportionate and brought to its highest point, without dystrophy. This is why he uses the word “full” to refer to the individual that develops in this way. His development is so to speak multilateral and no longer unilateral, as it is the case for the Fichtean individual. In addition, the excerpt refers to the “multiplicity of situations”. Now we have seen that, in Fichte, nature causes through the diversity it introduces a fragmentation of humanity that can only be surmounted at the cost of an infinite task. In

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<sup>23</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 22; trans., p. 16.

Humboldt, on the contrary, the multiplicity of situations to which the individual is exposed is not a factor of impoverishment that would incline him to withdraw on his particular talents, but rather a positive factor for his personality, as long as he knows how to take advantage of it. Of course, the Fichtean individual is also put in contact with others. Through his “communication”<sup>24</sup> drive, he receives from others the elements of the culture he was unable to produce by himself. On the other hand, the Humboldtian *Bildung* allows the individual to realize in an harmonious manner his own formation by drawing on his multiple experiences with the outside world, and in particular with the social world. The organic metaphor is very present in the passages of Humboldt’s text touching on *Bildung*<sup>25</sup> and it conveys very well the spirit in which he conceives the latter. The necessary condition to the growth of an organism is obviously the presence in the environment of the nutrients necessary to its development. This is the role of the multiplicity of different situations mentioned in the excerpt above, which represents a real factor of enrichment of a personality conceived as a whole. But if we follow the metaphor through, which Humboldt would certainly not be reluctant to, we have to acknowledge that the growth itself would be impossible without the presence in the organism of an internal principle, without a vital principle of self-formation that assimilates and integrates in a coherent whole the materials made available by the environment.

In the excerpt cited, Humboldt finally mentions freedom as an essential condition to *Bildung*. But what is more striking here is not so much that Humboldt lays particular stress on this leitmotiv of German idealism, but rather that he reduces its status to that of a simple “condition” of *Bildung*.<sup>26</sup> That is to say that the human being is in the first place viewed as an individual who develops by himself and for himself. It is hard to conceive that Humboldt could be led to sacrifice this individual first preoccupied by the full blossoming of his originality. If German idealism got us into the habit of interpreting freedom in terms of spontaneity and autonomy, we have to admit that here it seems to rest on a vital principle that has no other aim but the harmonious and full development of

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<sup>24</sup> Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen*, *Werke* VI, p. 315.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 25, 32.

<sup>26</sup> See Robert Haerdter in his postscript to the *Versuch*, p. 218. To revisit the themes of multiplicity and freedom in Schleiermacher, see *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 150.

the individual according to his specific finality.<sup>27</sup> To designate the unity of the individual that develops himself deliberately and in a methodical way, Humboldt uses the word *Eigentümlichkeit*, which can be translated as “originality” or “significant particularity.”<sup>28</sup> As the etymology of the German word indicates, *Eigentümlichkeit* refers to a “distinguishing” feature. But this particularity is not autistic in a sense where it would refer to a singularity cut off from all relation to its environment. The personality conquered at the outcome of the process of *Bildung* presents itself as an original figure, that is to say as an individual that is able to draw on his inner life as on the original sources and that reflects on his environment. Even if not explicitly made by Humboldt, the comparison between this type of personality and a work of art as an autonomous whole and a microcosm forces itself upon us.<sup>29</sup> It is reminiscent of Goethe’s attitude – friend of Humboldt –, who wants to create a work of art out of his life. One thing is certain however, we are not allowed to assimilate *Eigentümlichkeit* to *Einseitigkeit*, the humboldtian originality to the Fichtean unilateralism. As if he was in a position to anticipate the concept of culture advocated by Fichte in his conferences on the scholar of 1794, Humboldt was already warning us, in his work of 1792, against the danger of atrophy facing the individual that puts all his efforts in the development of only one talent, and showed the way to remedy it. “Every human being... can act with only one dominant faculty at a time... It would therefore seem to follow from this, that man is inevitably destined to a one-sided cultivation, [*Einseitigkeit*] since he enfeebles his energies by directing them into a multiplicity of objects. But man has it in his power to avoid this one-sidedness, by attempting to unite the distinct and generally separately exercised faculties of his nature.”<sup>30</sup> The individual is therefore not condemned to use in an isolated manner only a few of his abilities. On the contrary, all he has to do is to relate them to each other to create a new, incomparable product.

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<sup>27</sup> It is proper however to add that the act of seeing to one’s own *Bildung* in turn modifies humanity’s character taken globally. Thus Humboldt confides to Forster: „Mir heisst in das Grosse und Ganze wirken: auf den Charakter der Menschheit wirken, und darauf wirkt jeder, so bald er auf sich und bloss auf sich wirkt“. Cited in Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens*, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 24, 43. See the same theme in Schleiermacher, *Monologen*, p. 31 ; Brouillon zur *Ethik* (1805/06), p. 13, 16.

<sup>29</sup> See Louis Dumont, *L’idéologie allemande*, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 22; trans. (modified), p. 16. For a similar passage in Schleiermacher, see his Brouillon zur *Ethik* (1805/06), p. 41. For a critique of one-sidedness, see also his *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 113.

If Humboldt keeps at a distance from a humanity entirely fragmented into overspecialized individuals, he also warns us against the reverse danger of a humanity that is present in all individuals, but reduced to the lowest common denominator. In other words, he is anxious not to fall out of the frying pan into the fire: if he warns us against unilateralism and overspecialisation, he is also preoccupied with telling us to beware of the standardization of a humanity composed of similar, but weakened individuals. And in that treatise of political theory, it is first and foremost the state that is accused of producing the homogenization of individuals, by simply identifying them to their citizen or subject's status, and reducing them to it. "Like [*gleichförmige*] causes produce like effects; and hence, in proportion as state interference increases, the agents to which it is applied come to resemble each other, as do all the results of their activity."<sup>31</sup> The liberal plea is here directed against state interventionism in general, but further in the work, Humboldt is able to develop his criticism and turn his attention to specific themes. In this way, Chapter VI of the book is devoted to the educational system and presents a unequivocal stand: Humboldt distinctly prefers private schooling to a public educational system, insofar as everything that emanates from the government invariably tends to serve the ends of the state, in this case to impose a standardized education which, by hindering the development of original personalities, keeps the people in indifference and indolence.<sup>32</sup> I already mentioned that in the document in which he outlined the organization of the University of Berlin, Humboldt concedes a certain intrusion of the state in the process of appointment of teachers, but in no way does that mean that he abandons his concept of *Bildung* and the originality connected with it, in the way in which he foresees the educational relationship.

The work from Humboldt which we just referred to, *The Limits of State Action*, is obviously a work of youth and it does not convey exactly Humboldt's position at the time he writes his document *On the Inner and Outer Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*. He actually broadened his point of view in the meantime, which, at the beginning, aimed at putting the emphasis exclusively on individual freedoms. In this way, the study of peoples becomes little by little for him an object of

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<sup>31</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 31; trans., p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Humboldt, *Versuch*, p. 72.

study. In the years 1805-1806, he formulates the ambitious project of a comparative anthropology that aims to show that, as for individuals, the different nations have their characteristic genius with the help of which they acquire a distinctive character. This means that all nations, by virtue of their distinctive traits, have an intrinsic value that is irreducible to that of any other culture there is. This intention of course follows the thesis of historicism according to which each epoch of human history, each civilization has in itself its center of gravity and must be appreciated according its particular characteristics. This is in contrast of course to the linear vision of an *Aufklärung* that define history as a constant progress under de aegis of reason. Besides, the great instigator of historicism in Germany, Herder, is he not himself the inventor of the *Bildung*? At least, this is what is suggested by the title of his 1774 work *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*.<sup>33</sup>

If each nation, each individual possesses value in itself, it is because each constitutes a *sui generis* element inside the creation. Such in fact is the general framework in which belongs Humboldt's "liberalism". The divine creation must not be read uniquely according to the plan of an eschatological history, entirely oriented towards a final result. On the contrary, what is also important is to show to advantage the infinite wealth of human history, which presents a multiplicity of different facets. This profusion of distinct figures, irreducible to a common denominator, actually shows the greatness of the divine project.

It would probably be easy to show that in the works that precede his *Occasional Thoughts*, Schleiermacher carried on a reflexion to the themes that presents a lot of resemblance with those expounded in Humboldt. In actual fact, we find there is a marked concern for *Bildung*, as well as for the "originality" that characterizes it. He stresses the importance for the individual to draw from the community in order to pursue his process of development while being careful not to let himself be swallowed up by this community. Therefore, it is important that each individual circumscribe his "sphere". Schleiermacher's texts, published in 1800, that is at the time when he was very close to the romantic movement, have an abundance of allusions directed to this end. The same is

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<sup>33</sup> On this subject, see Louis Dumont, *L'idéologie allemande*, p. 110-111. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Clio: The Romantic Muse. Historicizing the Faculties in Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 180-181.



true for the remainder of the *Brouillon zur Ethik* dating from 1806-1807 in which Hans-Joachim Birkner sees an “ethics of individuality”<sup>34</sup> being outlined. But instead of looking into these texts, let us illustrate their content in concrete terms by underlining some elements of the educational theory that follow from them.

### III – The student life and the organization of studies in the new university.

Before tackling their differences at the level of the educational approach for university teaching, it is important to stress the fact that the three protagonists involved in the debate share a certain number of theoretical premises. I have already mentioned the importance of academic freedom, but I should also stress the predominant place, in Humboldt and Schleiermacher as in Fichte, of the active participation of the student to the educational process. If the self-education, in the specific meaning that we have identified for the *Bildung*, belongs in its own right to the model put forward by Humboldt and Schleiermacher, it does not mean that the Fichtean student will behave in a passive way for it. The keynote of Fichte’s whole philosophy is the primacy of the practical. Thus in the field of pedagogy, Fichte could only be in agreement with the theses of the great theoretician Pestalozzi for whom education requires in an essential manner the active and constant participation on the part of the student. Therefore, in all cases, it is important to break the ties with an academic institution that only relies on rote learning and mechanical educational methods. It is a question of freeing the institutions of higher education from all the dogmatism and the whiff of scholasticism that can still afflict them. On that score, some universities already in place, like Göttingen and Halle, began to show the way. It is therefore a question of continuing those efforts by seizing the occasion that is offered to set up a brand new university in Berlin.

In order to properly differentiate Fichte’s position from that of his liberal opponents, we can use an example that, even if at first sight it may seem to be only an insignificant detail, nonetheless conceals, as we will see, a far-reaching significance. The example refers to student life and concerns one of its facets among many others: the dress code. For instance, Fichte proposes that the “regular” students of the university wear a

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<sup>34</sup> See his introduction to Schleiermacher, *Brouillon zur Ethik* (1805/06), p. VII.

“uniform”. It does not matter that by this means he is anxious to distinguish these students from the novices and the honorary members. It is the fact itself, namely that he wants to impose the wearing of the uniform, that is in itself significant. Because in his *Occasional Thoughts*, Schleiermacher advocates exactly the opposite: the students are expressly invited to adopt the clothing of their choice, without hesitating, if need be, to fall into extravagance. What can we say about Schleiermacher’s rather libertarian attitude faced with Fichte’s position? Here the contrast is striking, but this simple disciplinary measure takes on a greater significance when we realize that it touches on one of the central issues of the subject of *Bildung*. We must remember that the concept of *Bildung* rejects any measure designed to fuse the individuals into a homogeneous mass. If the German language refers to the clothing here in question by the substantive *Uniform*, as in English, German has at its disposal, to refer this time to the English adjective ‘uniform’, its own construction, but in all respects equivalent: *ein-förmig*. Consequently, if Fichte requires that the uniform be worn in the institution of higher education, does it mean in the same way that the education of the student would also be likely to adopt only one form, as opposed to the cult of “originality” advocated by the supporters of *Bildung*? In other words, is education aimed at bringing up the student to a unique system of knowledge accepted as a norm or else is it seeking to promote the development of the individual through knowledge? These are in fact the general terms of the debate that define the opposition here in question.

The section of Schleiermacher’s text in which the latter handles the question of the dress code is entitled “On the Usages and Customs at the University and on Surveillance.”<sup>35</sup> To be sure, this section does not deal with morality as such, for even within the walls of the university, Schleiermacher does not tolerate any derogation from moral duties or bending of the laws of civil society. But by adopting a liberal attitude, comprehensive with respect to the concrete way of life of students, he presupposes that there is a very clear dividing line between the manners commonly accepted in society and the ‘alternative’ way of life that can adopt young people on account of their special student status. In fact, it is because this phase in the life of the young people, i.e. their studies, is a transitional stage, that in which between when the child is enjoined to obey

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<sup>35</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 148-159.

without batting an eyelid, and the adoption, in adulthood, of a profession or social position, which are governed by a code of conduct that is not always free of conformism. Between these two stages where the room to manoeuvre of the individual is fairly thin, there are the university studies and their corresponding way of life. For Schleiermacher, the task of the students, that consists in forming themselves (*bilden*) through science, is in keeping with this privileged stage, during which it is possible to stand back from the social conventions, with a view to examine their value and eventually reject it to invent new ways of life. The period of studies is this very special stage where the individual can indulge in all imaginable experiments in order to adopt in the end the kind of life that best suits his unique personality. That is why, besides extravagances in clothing, Schleiermacher also urges the reader to open-mindedness when faced with the linguistic features introduced by the students, faced with their overeating and also sometimes even their extreme frugality, faced with them spending money extravagantly as much as their Spartan way of life. For they are all trials and errors that allow young persons to better know themselves and become conscious of their uniqueness, which is likely to shelter them from the leveling brought about by the conventions of a civil society that they will be forced to reintegrate at the end of their studies. Here is how Schleiermacher justifies this dimension of academic freedom: “When this freedom is formed [*sich bildet*] by itself in such a way that it becomes part of the innermost spirit of the university; when the multiplicity [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] and the originality [*Eigentümlichkeit*] of the lifestyles become all the more prominent than in the order strands of society uniformity [*Gleichförmigkeit*] and lack of character [*Charakterlosigkeit*] come to the fore: then this freedom seems to be a beneficial counterweight to which we should not oppose unless we have the best reasons to do so.”<sup>36</sup> We can clearly see here the stakes associated with the freedom conceded to students. That which at the beginning can seem to be only an intolerable turmoil turns out to be, when all is said and done, beneficial at the highest degree for the future citizen and for the progress of society in general.

There is nevertheless a point that is separately dealt with by Schleiermacher and which he describes in a prudent and detailed manner. It is the question of the many cases of duels that under pretexts that on the surface may seem frivolous, take place

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<sup>36</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 153-154.

between students. The question is delicate, but Schleiermacher does not depart from his general line of conduct and maintains that the duel is an institution that must be tolerated. For, to him, what is at stake in every duel is the attack to the honour of the individual. Now, the sense of honour is in his eyes essential for the development of the person and the duel probably provides that person with the only means to defend that honour, at the peril of his life. Such is definitely the deep-rooted motivation of Schleiermacher's tolerant attitude, who pretends moreover that the duel leads to a tragic outcome only in some very rare cases.

Fichte's reply to this unacceptable concession made by Schleiermacher will be more than categorical. He actually devotes all his energy to condemning the duel, first for obvious moral reasons, but also for reasons touching on the very idea of what must be the honour of the student. If, as Schleiermacher intends it, the student enjoys momentarily a privileged status that places him on the fringe of society, he must still prove equal to the privilege that was bestowed on him, by devoting himself body and soul to the task of learning. And it is precisely in this that lies his honour. He must devote his time and efforts to this task, and to nothing else. He is, as we say nowadays, a "learner" and he must show that he is worthy of this status that exempts him from seeing to his material subsistence. Now, because knowledge results in a greater lucidity with regard to moral duty, a serious student would never challenge someone to a duel. Students and teachers must devote themselves exclusively to the task of knowledge, and this is why, in Fichte, the former as well as the latter wear the uniform. This external distinction in fact shows the specific character of their common mission.<sup>37</sup> However, a question crops up right away: does the wearing of an identical uniform by both groups mean that teachers and students are on an equal footing? Far from it.

Two remarks can here take the place of an answer to that question. The first concerns the relationship of students between themselves. If regular students wear the

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<sup>37</sup> The wearing of the uniform however does not promote the student to the rank of a social position (*Stand*). On the contrary, by refusing the duel, Fichte wants to neutralize the influence of a particular stand, the nobility, which introduces its own practices in the university. The duel is the best example of it. I am referring here to Jean-François Goubet's manuscript, "Über die Akademische Freiheit. Analyse eines sittlichen, rechtlichen und philosophisch-grundlegenden Begriffs in Bezug auf Fichtes Antrittsrede zum Rektoreamt im Jahre 1811". For a criticism of the student's disorderly lifestyle, see Fichte, *Fünf Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, Werke XI, p. 145-208.

uniform, it is because they are entrusted with a common mission. Of course, the fact that they are encouraged in accordance with Fichte's plan to communicate between themselves contributes to increase the acquisition of knowledge. But the latter consequently becomes a common good, with the result that by no means do we aim in this way at the development of the individual as a unique personality. On this topic, Fichte speaks rather of a "fusion of the individuals in an organic whole devoted to learning."<sup>38</sup> If the individual is seen as disappearing into the whole, assimilated to it, it is that he is only considered in his capacity as a learner (*lernende Individuen*). The detail is important as Schleiermacher prefers for his part to describe the university not as a place where one learns (*Lernen*) but where one develops knowledge (*Erkennen*) in itself.<sup>39</sup> As we will see, the latter will invite the student to do science, whereas Fichte, on the whole, simply urges him to accede to science.

This is reflected in the way Fichte understands the teacher-student relationship. And this is the object of my second remark. Of course, Fichte strongly recommends the continuous communication between teacher and students, as he was encouraging communication between students. He even insists for a true "Socratic dialogue" to take place between the professor and the student.<sup>40</sup> But then, we must remember that – and Fichte's text is clear on that subject – in a Socratic dialogue the teacher acts like as a midwife. He knows in advance the answer, the only possible one, and he brings his interlocutor, with the help of sustained exchange, to discover it in himself. This way, it goes without saying, the student "forms" himself, but he forms himself in a direction prescribed in advance, the same for all. Thus, for example, when in his *Deduced Scheme* Fichte discusses the teaching of philosophy, which takes the form of a dialogue with the student, he admits that it is out of the question for the philosophy teacher to impart to the student in a peremptory manner his own philosophical system. Actually, Fichte is quite convinced that, his science of knowledge being the one and only true philosophical system, a student that with his help systematically follows his own

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<sup>38</sup> Fichte, *Deducirter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt*, *Werke* VIII, p 104.

<sup>39</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Fichte, *Deducirter Plan*, *Werke* VIII, p 104-105. See from the same author, *Ideen für die innere Organisation der Universität Erlangen* (1805/06), *Werke* XI, p. 280-281. For that matter, Hegel shares Fichte's opinion on that point. See Hegel, review of the *Nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel* of Solger (1828), in *Werke* 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 270.

thought process, can only arrive at this philosophy and reconstruct the system in full. According to this viewpoint, the teaching relationship is in keeping with a process where the goal is not to provide the student with the occasion to develop according to his own genius, but to help him reach the pinnacle of knowledge.

As we could have expected, the situation is very different among the supporters of a liberal education. And this is equally true in relation to the status and the role of the student as it is of his relationship with the teacher. In this way, according to the model expounded by Schleiermacher, the student is certainly not only a raw material to which we would impose a specific form; he is on the contrary an active element of the institution, a fully qualified member. We can even go as far as saying that the university is there for him, in the sense that its task is to promote the expression of his “personal originality.” It must contribute to the growth of that which is in a latent state in himself: an “original intellectual life” (*eigentlich*). This is because the student is driven deep down by a “principle of development” (*bildendes Prinzip*) that needs to manifest itself.<sup>41</sup> But for that, he must feed his personality and it is in the institution of higher education that he draws the material necessary to his blossoming. As Louis Dumont writes with regard to the Humboldtian approach to university, “*Wissenschaft* is not in the service of the state, it provides the individual with the materials out of which he achieves his *Bildung*.”<sup>42</sup> It obviously goes without saying that for these authors the university must be useful to the state, so it comprises components relating to vocational training. But in the university of liberal approach, it is science that must be at the heart of the institution, and this “objective science” must necessarily be connected to the “subjective *Bildung*.”<sup>43</sup> The student is therefore not bound by any constraint as far as the choice of courses and attendance are concerned. It is he who creates his program according to his intellectual development’s own requirements.

For instance the student is in search of something other than simple elements of doctrine. I just mentioned that for Schleiermacher the university is not so much the place where we learn, as it is the one where we are involved in the production of knowledge. From the teacher’s point of view, the institution is also defined as a place

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<sup>41</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 123, 157.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Dumont, *L'idéologie allemande*, p. 171.

<sup>43</sup> Humboldt, *Organisation*, p. 377.

where research and teaching become closely linked (*Einheit von Forschung und Lehre*). This means that what is the subject of teaching is the fruit of the teacher's current research. But the university student is expressly invited to actively engage in research development. And this, not only to perform subordinate tasks, but in full right. The following excerpt, taken from the project written by Humboldt, is very eloquent in this respect. "The relation between teacher and student become... totally different from what it was [at the Gymnasium. C. P.]. The teacher is not there for them, they are all there for science; his task is dependent upon their presence and, without it, it would not be fulfilled as efficiently. If they did not gather spontaneously around him, he would have to search for them in order to come closer to his goals through the combination of his acquired strengths, which are however for this reason likely to be less lively and more unilateral, with their weaker but less partial strengths heading enthusiastically in every direction."<sup>44</sup> This close collaboration between teacher and student finds its paradigmatic expression in the seminars, which are a German specialty. Naturally, the seminar is not accessible to all, but only to the most advanced students. However, it underlines very well the importance attached to the student who, with the help of his own resources, takes part in research on an equal footing. According to Schleiermacher, this formula is particularly appropriate for the sciences that have a concrete object, because they engage in research that constitutes a never-ending quest.<sup>45</sup> It is very significant that in his *Deduced Scheme*, Fichte does not mention the formula of the seminar (except when intended exclusively for teachers).<sup>46</sup> He only touches on the *conversatorium*. But precisely in that case the student is not invited to contribute to the development of science. In his private conversation with the teacher, he goes back to the content of the class and the difficulties he met with instead. Now, it is at this moment that the teacher, according to Fichte, uses his art of midwifery.

This brings us, to finish, to the structuring of the various disciplines within the university. We must expect from the outset that this structure be very hierarchical in

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<sup>44</sup> Humboldt, *Organization*, p. 378.

<sup>45</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 140: "Die Seminarien... schliessen sich an die Disziplinen an, welche mehr in das besondere gehen, und sind dasjenige Zusammensein der Lehrer und Schüler, worin die letzteren schon als produzierend auftreten und die Lehrer nicht sowohl unmittelbar mitteilen als nur diese Produktion leiten, unterstützen und beurteilen."

<sup>46</sup> We must admit however that Fichte's plan remained unfinished.

Fichte and that philosophy occupies the predominant position. Since the very beginning of the project of the science of knowledge, it is in fact clear that for Fichte there is only true philosophy and that this philosophy provides the first principles of all the other scientific disciplines. This is why this philosophy defined itself directly as the “science of sciences in general”. This expression appears in a text whose title shows right from the beginning that Fichte intends to mark his distance in relation to everything that up to this point was done under the title of “philosophy”: *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre or of What we Use to Call Philosophy*.<sup>47</sup> This text dates from the spring of 1794, at the moment when Fichte had just accepted a chair in philosophy at the university of Jena. But the latter will stand by this opinion of his own system until the end of his career.<sup>48</sup> It is not surprising consequently that the student be considered as the one who must, by himself and through his own resources rise to that knowledge. Hence the emphasis put by Fichte on his status of *Lehrling* (learner). It is not surprising either that the pedagogical model proposed by Fichte has a bit of an ‘authoritarian’ appearance. But this is especially valid for the very last Fichte, the author of the 1813 *Staatslehre*.<sup>49</sup> The tone is much more restrained in the *Deduced Scheme*, so that it is probably more accurate to characterize the pedagogical program that is developed there, as ‘controlled’, as opposed to the liberal model.

Schleiermacher shares with Fichte the thesis according to which philosophy comes first within the university. However, when we scrutinize things more closely, we realize that the hierarchy that follows from it is less strict in Schleiermacher. As a matter of fact, the latter revives one of Kant’s last battles: to show that in the traditional hierarchy of university faculties (theology, law, medicine and philosophy), it is the ‘lower’ faculty (philosophy) that must hold the supremacy from a purely scientific point of view. Now as the mission of the university of Schleiermacher and of Humboldt essentially revolves around *Wissenschaft* (as opposed to the technical and vocational training) it was foreseeable that in this respect Schleiermacher was going to support Fichte, and by extension Kant. However, it is to be well noted that this position is not

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<sup>47</sup> Fichte, *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie*, *Werke* I, p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Fichte, *Die Staatslehre* (1813), *Werke* IV, p. 373. Fichte describes here the term philosophy as a *nichtiger Name*.

<sup>49</sup> See my « La *Doctrine de l’État* de 1813 et la question de l’éducation chez Fichte », in J.-C. Goddard and M. Maesschalck (eds), *Fichte. La philosophie de la maturité (1804-1814)* (Paris: Vrin, 2003), p. 159-174.



really compromising since the primacy of philosophy is maintained in the first place as a university faculty. That means that all the disciplines comprised in this faculty are affected by it, including of course the empirical sciences. The priority goes quite as much to the empirical disciplines as to philosophy in the narrow sense of the term. “The whole natural organization of the sciences is exclusively contained in the [faculty of philosophy, C.P.]: the pure transcendental philosophy and the natural as well as the historical sciences...”<sup>50</sup> Philosophy in the narrow sense of the term has no special privilege. But here also, there again, Schleiermacher, who feels closer to Schelling than to Fichte, hesitates in his text to give his opinion on the respective worth of philosophical systems.<sup>51</sup> He had moreover announced in his previous works that there is no such thing as a unique philosophy. Any philosophy must according to him have a national colour, and so we count as many philosophies as there were philosophical peoples in the past. Moreover, despite the continuity made possible by tradition, he maintains that strictly speaking philosophical terminology cannot be translated. We must therefore conclude that in his project philosophy has first and foremost an encyclopaedic role.<sup>52</sup>

Humboldt’s attitude is just as inclusive in relation to the hierarchy of knowledge within the university. He even prefers to mention four fundamental disciplines, with no order of priority. This way, he keeps at a distance from the philosopher’s mania of wanting to ‘deduce’ everything, including the program of studies at the university, a habit that he will criticize by name.<sup>53</sup> Now we know that the project submitted by Fichte was entitled *Deduced Scheme*. The allusion is here very clear and translates Humboldt’s mistrust faced with the philosopher’s claims. Besides, if to history, philology and mathematics Humboldt added philosophy according to the strictest definition of the term, it is in order not to go against Schleiermacher’s proposal. But we should note that at the beginning he thought about including as the fourth discipline anthropology, his favourite field of research. For what is important for the university is not the hierarchy of knowledge but rather the multiplicity and wealth of the sciences to which the individual can choose to devote himself with a view to his own development.

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<sup>50</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 133, 134.

<sup>51</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 127.

<sup>52</sup> Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, p. 117-118 ; see also *Brouillon zur Ethik (1805/06)*, p. 25, 91.

<sup>53</sup> Humboldt, *Organisation*, p. 382.

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Let us briefly review the two approaches to university that were compared here and examine their topicality, or even their obsolete character, without it being prejudicial for it to the intrinsic value and the respective worth of both positions. In other words, the question consists in knowing if, independently of the appeal they may hold for us, those two models of university organisation are still practicable today.

The distinctive trait of the plan proposed by Fichte lies in the pre-eminence of philosophy, which fulfills a predominant role. It is dominant in this model insofar as, as we have seen, it provides the different sciences with their first principle. Philosophy sees itself here as being invested with a foundational role. But, already at the time when he writes his project, Fichte has no illusions as for the reception that will be given by the scientists to this interference of philosophy.<sup>54</sup> He knows that he must expect to come up against a profound distrust and a resolute scepticism. Fichte's position reproduces in reality a classical gesture in philosophy, which was handed down to posterity after him. Thus, for example, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the neo-Kantians brought up again this pretension to found all scientific discourses, but with a mixed success. By what right in fact does philosophy allow itself to intervene in scientific practices that develop themselves very well by following their inner logic and their own procedures? That is obviously the question that Richard Rorty asks in his work *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*.<sup>55</sup> He questions there as a matter of fact the historical figure of a neo-Kantian fairly unrecognized, Eduard Zeller, but he tries through that to reveal the last whiff of the domineering attitude of philosophy that we find in the first phases of this now plural movement which is analytic philosophy. We have seen that Fichte's science of knowledge also tries to be, through some of its aspects, a theory of knowledge, a philosophy of all the sciences. But it does not matter here that the foundation of the scientific disciplines refers to a transcendental philosophy fully assumed as in Fichte, or to a simple epistemology as is often the case for neo-Kantians.

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<sup>54</sup> Fichte, *Deducirter Plan*, *Werke* VIII, p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

The fact is that it now appears impossible to assign to philosophy a directing role within the contemporary university.

If we now turn to the liberal model, we realize that the structure of the institution and the program of study are less restricting there. But what may seem to be a program leading to dilettantism and to a lack of concern is really supported by a deep-rooted conviction both in Humboldt and in Schleiermacher: the process of *Bildung* must in the end lead to a better man, in the sense that the practice of science is at the same time a moral education.<sup>56</sup> This concept, inherited from antiquity, has fairly lost its plausibility nowadays, we must admit. If modern science follows an internal logic, it is hard to see how the development of a specific scientific set of problems could take on simultaneously the role of a moral education. We are in an era of specialization, which proves to be a must for the success of scientific research, and so the individual preoccupied with his own *Bildung*, this personality that presents itself to us as a microcosm in constant expansion, can hardly find its place in our university institutions. Of course, this ideal of a complete human being, well-balanced and cultivated survives nowadays, in the university programs dedicated to the humanities for example. We find there obviously some similarities with the neo-humanist project that is at the origin of the ideal of *Bildung*. These programs nevertheless remain the exception in those immense enterprises that our universities have become.

I intentionally use here the word “enterprises” to characterize the contemporary university. In fact, I borrow this word from Max Weber who in 1917, in his lecture on “Science as a vocation”, uses it to depict modern university. It is because the institutions of higher education have become gigantic organisations, endowed with considerable means. And this is precisely where the problem arises: scientific research requires more and more significant means, and it has the consequence of increasing the dependency of the university on the outside world: “We can clearly observe here at home that the newest trend in large domains of scientific activity at the university level tend towards the American model. The huge research centres in the field of medicine and of the natural sciences are enterprises of state capitalism. They cannot be managed without

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<sup>56</sup> Humboldt, *Organisation*, p. 377.

the input of important resources.”<sup>57</sup> This excerpt here raises a question that was quickly resolved at the beginning of this presentation on the foundation of the University of Berlin: the independence of the university towards the government and the economic system. The assertion of the autonomy of the institution was really the necessary presupposition for the debate between ‘liberalism’ and ‘authoritarianism’ to take place. It was an original premise that had to be considered established. However, nowadays, it is less and less. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Weber mentions the government’s appropriation of the institution on account of the magnitude of the investments granted there, but he also sees the German university splitting up, around which revolve, with a relative independence, research institutes and specialized schools ready to meet the demands of the milieu, notably of the economic system. And the trend became more pronounced, so that the main problem that arises nowadays has to do with the enormous pressure exerted on the university by the industrial world and the government apparatus. We see the economic system determine in an ever more precise way the research priorities within the institution.<sup>58</sup> Also, the government, acting as a subsidizing organism, has progressively tended to match its research subsidies not only to an obligation of results, but also, because it feels ‘indebted’ to the population, to a commitment from the recipient to produce a research useful to the milieu, and to do so in a tangible way.

In these conditions, it is assuredly illusory to defend the Fichtean model of a university organized in a hierarchical way. The autonomy of the disciplines, the specialization of research and the fragmentation of the institution into multiple institutes and centres of research linked to the needs of civil society clearly makes it inconceivable. As for the self-education within the institution, it represents without a doubt an interesting model, but how untimely given the current state of affairs. And yet, Humboldt firmly believed that in the modern age, progress is no longer engendered by the community but only by the individual.

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<sup>57</sup> Max Weber, „Wissenschaft als Beruf“, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973), p. 584.

<sup>58</sup> See my article “Habermas et la mission de l’université contemporaine”, *Symposium* 7 (2002), p. 5-20.